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**On the Hill:**  
NSBA bill strikes a chord  
for local governance

## Going the Extra Mile

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and many districts recognize they  
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Lawrence Hardy

# Going the Extra Mile

*Education isn't only about academics, and many districts recognize they must meet children's social, emotional, and physical needs to help them learn in the classroom*

**T**each the students, not the curriculum. That's a maxim that great teachers—and great schools and school districts—live by.

It means that, no matter how enriching the curriculum, if the material is not getting through to the students—if it is not meeting them *where they are*—the whole educational enterprise has failed.

Education is always a challenge, but if most of your students are middle class and college-bound, meeting them where they are may not be so difficult. Their parents have, for the most part, ensured that they are at least positioned for success.

The same is not true if your students are disadvantaged, if their parents are undereducated themselves, or if they come from minority communities that have historically faced discrimination or communities where jobs are scarce and the risk of dropping out is high. In these cases, dynamic school districts must go the extra mile to ensure that their students have a chance to succeed.

This month, we take a look at four districts that have worked tirelessly on behalf of disadvantaged students—and,

indeed, all students. All of the districts won Magna Awards this year from the editors of *ASBJ* and Sodexo. For more examples of outstanding programs, go to [www.asbj.com/magna](http://www.asbj.com/magna).

## **Kotzebue, Alaska**

At times, some adults in the villages might question why a certain student was made a Youth Leader by the Northwest Arctic Borough School District in Kotzebue, Alaska.

"He smokes too much weed," they might say. Or: "He handles himself poorly, and is a bad role model for younger students."

Michelle Woods, coordinator of the Youth Leaders program at this isolated, widely dispersed district north of the Arctic Circle, understands their concerns. But she emphasizes that these are the leaders the students have chosen, peers they could go to if they had a problem.

She's equally blunt with the Youth Leaders themselves.

"We teach these kids that—whether they like it or not—they are role models for the younger kids" and their peers, she says.

When the district launched the program five years ago, its prime purpose was to reduce the alarming number of suicides—eight that year for a student population of about 2,000.



That goal has been accomplished: In the past two years, there have been none. But Youth Leaders is more than a suicide prevention program, even as critical as that goal is. In this difficult environment, where 93 percent of students are native Inupiaq, it is showing them they have a voice and a future.

By almost any definition, the students' environment is harsh. Northwest Arctic serves the town of Kotzebue and 10 other villages spread over an area the size of Indiana. Average winter temperatures are 10 degrees below zero. There are no roads between villages; provisions must be brought in by air except for three months in the summer, when Kotzebue's port is navigable.

Most families live by subsistence hunting and fishing, mostly done in the summer. Perhaps not surprisingly, due to the extreme isolation and harsh conditions many families face, the area traditionally has had high levels of suicide, substance and domestic abuse, teen pregnancy, and gun violence.

To address these problems, the school board could have invested in short-term staff, whom Woods says are known for staying a couple of years and then moving on to less-difficult assignments. Students who bond with these staff members and their families often feel abandoned.

Instead, the school board decided, as Woods puts it, "to invest in our students" and make them the leaders they have the potential to become.

After the first week of school, about 115 Youth Leaders are flown to Kotzebue for an intensive weekend workshop. Participants do teambuilding exercises and work on leadership skills. But they also talk about more difficult issues—suicide, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and bullying. It ends with "a healing circle," and a celebration of life.

The Youth Leaders are asked to reach out to every student in their respective schools. They visit younger students in their classrooms and talk about the issues they face. A Youth Leader also sits on the regional school board, and representatives have even met with the state legislature.

With few activities in the villages, the Youth Leaders have sponsored health promotions and three-on-three basketball tournaments, and they work with village elders to promote the health of the Inupiaq culture.

Nothing comes cheap in Alaska, with transportation one of the biggest expenses. Flying one student to the opening fall retreat costs at least \$500. The district originally funded the program through a three-year Elementary and Secondary School Grant from the U.S. Department of Education. When that grant ran out, the school board reached out to the Teck Corp., which is funding the program for another five years at a cost of more than \$1.25 million.



Through the program, students have learned their futures can be brighter, whether they choose to remain in their villages after high school or to leave the area.

"You know, you taught me to stand up for myself," one student told Woods.

Said another: "You taught me that I need to live."

#### Virginia's Albemarle County

Not all isolation is geographical. The small city of Charlottesville, Va., is tucked into the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, more than 70 miles from the state capital. But it is hardly remote.

The area is home to the prestigious University of Virginia, retired Hollywood movie stars, and more than a handful of millionaire—and billionaire—wine growers. Not exactly the end of the earth.

But if you're an African-American male who is good at math, and you find yourself in a high-level high school classroom with nobody—or maybe just one other student—who looks like you, it can be a little intimidating. What if you have a question? Do you raise your hand ... or just let it go?

"When they're in regular school, they lack confidence when asking questions," says Bernard Hairston, executive director of community engagement for the 12,500-student Albemarle County Public Schools, which surrounds Charlottesville.

That's why Hairston and a group called 100 Black Men of Central Virginia created a program called M-cubed (Math, Men, and Mission). The program brings together more than 60 African-American upper-elementary and middle school boys who show promise in math, the boys' families, and mentors who help the students develop self-confidence, social skills,





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Photo inset: Dr. Allen Bourff of the Early College Academy in Richmond, Indiana.

Charlottesville school board, is a career counselor for the Albemarle County Schools, and works with M-cubed.

"We say, 'They're all our kids,'" Wade says.

#### **Eminence, Ky.**

The Wi-Fi bus got all the publicity. That's what the Kentucky media wanted to talk about. But really, people with the 680-student Eminence Independent Schools will tell you, it's about a lot more than that.

Not that they're complaining. This is, after all, a district whose teaching motto is "surprise and delight," a place that prepares for Kentucky's famously rigorous tests by, well, *not* preparing.

"The approach is, we don't talk

about the tests at *all*," says Instructional Supervisor Thom Coffee. OK, he adds, maybe they devote a week to them.

*But what about the bus?*

We'll get to the bus.

Eminence has earned recognition for its two-year-old program, School on F.I.R.E, which is a lot easier to fit in a headline than "Framework of Innovation for Reinventing Education." But they mean the same thing.

District staff and board members became concerned about the high number of former students dropping out of college. In this small community in north central Kentucky, where the elementary, middle, and high schools are all basically in the same building, it wasn't that hard to find this out.

"You go to a local restaurant and ask, 'Where's so-and-so?'" Coffee says. "Everybody knows."

Once it realized it had a problem, Eminence did something that not every district would consider: It asked students what they thought. And the students came up with two issues they believed needed to be resolved: Higher-performing students weren't being challenged enough, and those who were struggling weren't getting the help they required.

A lot of people might ask students for their advice, Coffee says. "Very few people follow through and make these changes happen for them."

*But what about the bus?*

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To address the needs of students who needed more academic challenges, the district formed a partnership with Bellarmine University in Louisville. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays about a quarter of the high school students take their core classes in Eminence, and Tuesdays

and responsibility. About 13 percent of Albemarle County students are African American.

The program kicks off with a two-week summer session, which is about math—and a lot more. The students learn about academic and social engagement and managing their behavior. They read a book about what it means to grow up black in America, such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or *Game*, Walter Dean Myers' novel about a troubled high school basketball player.

Hairston says he often is astounded by the depth of the questions students ask when discussing the books with their mentors and other youth. Some students already are big readers, but for others, "This is the first time they've read a book from cover to cover."

The four-year-old program also helps by charting postsecondary paths for students who would be the first in their family to attend or graduate from college. And it's getting results. Final math grades of the participants have increased from a C average the first year to B averages in four years. Of those students in the program for two years, 67 percent were enrolled in advanced or honors math classes.

Though housed in Albemarle, the program also has reached out to students from the Charlottesville Public Schools. And it has attracted mentors from across the region.

Juandiego Wade, Charlottesville's board president, has been involved with the program for several years. The first student he mentored is now in ninth grade.

"He's on his way," Wade says. "We believe he'll be fine."

Wade, chair of the Federal Relations Network for the Virginia School Boards Association, wears many hats in his hometown. He lives in Charlottesville, serves on the



and Thursdays they travel (yes, by bus) to Bellarmine for college-level courses.

"We were very up front with [Bellarmine] from the beginning," Coffee says. "We didn't want a watered-down version of a college course; we wanted college courses."

Now about that bus: One thing the Eminence schools pride themselves on is that everyone—students and staff alike—is encouraged to express his or her opinion, whether or not it conforms to the majority view. For example, a Student Voice team meets regularly with the administration.

So when staff members were considering having students spend an hour to 90 minutes in transit two days a week, one skeptic worried about the loss of instructional time. Then someone thought of having a mobile Internet connection.

"I can make that," Coffee recalls the transportation director saying. "You want that hot spot? I can mount it on the bus."

Through the arrangement with Bellarmine, the students get a 92 percent reduction in standard tuition. The district pays the rest by allocating \$250,000 to the program. Students can earn up to 52 hours of credit, enough to enter college as a junior upon high school graduation.

And what about the students who said they were having trouble? With almost a quarter of the student population gone two days a week there is more time—and smaller classes—for extra help on difficult courses.

Eminence was not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress prior to the start of School on F.I.R.E. Now, according to state data, Eminence High School is in the top 15 percent of Kentucky high schools.

In addition to extra help, students who remain in Eminence on Tuesdays and Thursdays are offered electives that the district could not provide before, such as a class in social media. As a classroom project, students decided they wanted to generate some media attention by getting into the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

"It started out, they were going to hold the world's longest barbecue," Coffee says. "They saw that as a daunting task and decided to switch" to creating the World's Largest Cling Wrap Ball.

The project is under way. And, if all goes well, Eminence schools could be the talk of the media world, once again.

Just imagine: "*Hey, did you hear about that humongous ball of clingwrap those Eminence kids put together?*"

"*Yeah! Amazing! ... And didn't they do something with a bus?*"

#### **Richmond, Ind.**

It's an old manufacturing town, where more than 70 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. Still, Allen Bourff, superintendent of the 5,000-student Richmond Community Schools, says that, five years ago, the Indiana district, not far from Dayton, Ohio, was making slow but steady progress. For example, cohort graduation rates, while still low, were improving, up from 54 percent in

past years to about 60 percent.

One morning in 2007 changed everything. That's when Richmond High School was named a "dropout factory" by Johns Hopkins University researcher Robert Balfanz.

"We found out in the newspaper," Bourff says.

"And a shock it was," adds school board President Linda Morgason.

Bourff is even-tempered, thoughtful, not easily upset. But the designation angered him, and he called Balfanz. The story might have ended there—with Bourff telling off the professor and challenging the university's representatives to visit Richmond and see for themselves what it was doing to improve student achievement: its high school freshman academy, more rigorous STEM coursework, and a redesigned schedule to foster learning relationships between students and teachers.

If fact, Bourff did invite Johns Hopkins officials to visit, not to defend or brag about Richmond's accomplishments but to help the district continue to improve.

"We realized that the high school dropout [problem] doesn't begin in high school," Bourff says. "It begins as early as kindergarten and prekindergarten."

And it involves a different subgroup than what you might expect.

"We did profiles," Bourff says, "and discovered some of our best students were dropping out of school."

The district identified high-potential and high-risk fifth- and sixth-graders, looking at such things as subsidized lunches, single-parent families, possible family dysfunction, and teacher recommendations. School representatives went to the students' homes. If the parents and student agreed, they signed compacts to commit to a college preparatory program.

In the Early College Preparatory Academy, 100 fifth-through eighth-graders are taught using the Socratic method and engage in weekly seminars on topics the students find significant and interesting.

The district has partnered with local organizations, and Ivy Tech Community College of Richmond paid part of a professor's salary to act as the program coordinator. The board paid the rest of the salary. To help close a budget deficit and still fund the program, the board made the difficult choice to close three elementary schools, at a savings of \$1.8 million.

The district wanted more detailed information about student achievement. It set up a Data Room in the high school, staffed by two full-time teachers who closely monitor the school's 1,500 students and coach teachers in more effective instructional methods.

"We call it the 'Data Room,'" Bourff says, "but some people would swear it's the 'War Room.'"

That kind of focus has paid off, he says. "It was a sense of urgency that permeated everything in the community." ■

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